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Fire Signs

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MY BOYFRIEND ROB loved the parched desert state of his childhood. I love Arizona too, but love isn't water, or the red streak of aerial flame retardant, or a morning without wind. In 2005, the year Rob killed himself, 66,000 wildfires immolated over 8 million acres of land in the United States. In Arizona alone, we survived four thousand out-of-control fires.

On our first date, Rob and I drove to Oak Creek Brewery in Sedona, AZ. Yo-yoing our way down switchbacks from mountainous Flagstaff into the valley, we passed a fire-warning sign with color-coded threat levels: yellow for moderate, orange for elevated, and red for high. He was 28; I was 22. He carried a gun and a degree in criminal justice; I carried a pocket notebook and a degree in creative writing. In the dryness of a late September heat wave, June's monsoons nothing but the memory of petrichor, I know before the sign comes fully into view that the arrow points red.

Rob's pack of American Spirits sits on the console between us. He nods at the sign as we blur by: "I don't smoke and drive," he says. "Fucking idiots keep burning down the forest." Implied: and I'm no idiot. I don't smoke yet, but I will. I don't love him yet, but I will. Nothing has yet caught fire in this lush valley, but it will. We round a switchback, and the arrow and its warning disappear from our rearview mirror.

I grew up in Flagstaff, AZ, a town built on volcanic rock. Rob grew up in Payson, a town built on the rim of a plateau—the Mogollon Rim, southern edge of the Colorado Plateau. When Rob first told me his plan, it went like this: "When my dad's dead and my mom finally goes, I'm going up on the Rim to the edge of the world. I'm going to watch one last sunrise, and then I'm going to shoot myself in the head." He failed to execute the particulars, but succeeded in the main: Sunrise. Gun. The end of the world.

In the summer, I bag pine needles and hacksaw low-hanging tree limbs, moving brush and branches away from our house. The most recent fire threatened my grandmother's home. Her neighbors wet down their shingled roof with a garden hose. On the Internet, I follow the weather, watching wind speeds rise and fall: 30 miles per hour is too high. Flames love strong wind; it's how they trap firefighters. People die by the unexpected, when shifting winds turn deadly. A popular summer activity in Flagstaff: getting up on someone's rooftop with beer, beach towels, and binoculars to watch the latest disaster. It's terribly beautiful when the planes drop fire retardant on a burn. The orange flames like jaws full of bloody teeth opening wide as the plane dives to loose a powdery fog on the inferno licking up from below.

Soon after Sedona, Rob took me to Payson to meet his parents. Frogs lined the walkway leading up to the front door. Large, small; plastic, ceramic; green, brown, hot pink and bright red; posed sitting with legs folded beneath, or poised mid-leap; a veritable Biblical plague. "Welcome!" said

his mother. "Sorry about all these. I don't know who started it; someone gave me one once, and now everyone buys them for me." She ushered us in. The living room: also frog decor. The blanket hanging over the couch featured an appliqued amphibian. Frogs dangled from the brass light fixtures. Rob shook his head, hugged his mother, did not bring her a frog. Should I have brought a frog? "It was funny at first but I'm sick of them," his mother confided.

Spadefoot frogs inhabit much of Arizona, especially Mogollon Rim country. Like all southwestern frog species, they are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Along with rapid groundwater depletion, climate change's most devastating effects on the region include the increased incidence and severity of forest fires.

Rob had bleached his black-brown hair blonde for Halloween; he'd be dressing up as Spike from Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I'd dyed my hair fire-engine red, as I was cast as Columbia in a benefit performance of the Rocky Horror Picture Show, all proceeds going to the community theater where we'd met. "Ketchup and Mustard," his father joked. "Get a load of these two. Which one's the bad influence?"

His mother's name is Nancy, same as my mother. His father's name was Don, like the verb. On the drive from Flagstaff to Payson, Rob railed against his dad, an artist who couldn't pay the bills, yet had insisted Nancy quit her nursing job in order to raise kids. Now, Don suffered severe health complications from diabetes, and Nancy served as his full-time nurse. "Watch what Dad eats," Rob told me. "He'll want to take us out to

dinner even though he can't afford it, and then he'll order a steak and every carb on the menu. I'm amazed he's not dead yet." Don would outlive his son by only six months.

Shortly after we arrived in Payson, Don gave me a tour of the garage that was his studio. He spent much of each day holed up in that garage, painting miniature desert scenes onto polished geodes. I marveled over the intricate paintings. In one, a tiny covered wagon rumbled over a cacti-pocked landscape. On second glance, I realized the landscape wasn't painted: that rutted ground? Was actually an agate striation. To my left, a roadrunner darted across jasper grassland. On my right, a quail guided her young around a barite outcropping. Don's art was genuinely beautiful. Arizona kitsch, yes, but also clever, and wonderfully executed.

Rob's dad toured the state throughout the year as part of the street festival scene, hand-selling his rock art. Don's favorite festival: the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, where he'd buy a year's worth of purple-veined geodes at rock-bottom prices. We bonded over this, as I'd covered the Show while a reporter at the university newspaper. Rob darted around the studio, cheery and animated. "This is my favorite," he said, pointing to a fluorite sphere resting on its plinth. From far away it resembled a glorified bowling ball, but closer inspection revealed an elaborate forest scene layered onto its green-brown-blue whorls. Deer chased one another around the globe. Tall pines cast their stalactite shadows. Bears splashed fish out of the creek's crystal waters.

Once we'd left the studio, Rob's stoked anger blazed up again:

"He promised to set aside a few pieces for my brother and me, but every time money got tight, he'd sell one or two. Now there's nothing left, and he's basically blind. Nothing he showed you is recent. He's already sold that globe." I'd always wondered why, despite his passion for acting, he'd pursued a criminal justice degree. By his senior year at Northern Arizona University, he'd become disillusioned with racist, sexist, quota-based policing and decided to keep on full-time at the grocery store where he'd worked since age 18, stocking the dairy aisle with milk and eggs. After meeting his family, I understood. Stability. Avoidance of frivolous artistic pursuits. To become the kind of guy who could support his partner's working life rather than feeling threatened by it. To not become his father.

Rob and I spent the night in separate rooms. In the morning, we joined Nancy on the back porch. Their backyard was dotted with birdfeeders full to bursting, and on the ground she'd unfurled a black garbage bag, atop of which sat a mountain of birdseed, three apple cores perched at its peak like cherries on a sundae. Together, we waited for wildlife. The squirrels arrived immediately, Nancy's careful mound scattered across the yard in seconds as the tuft-eared invaders tumbled over one another to get at the apple cores. She had to do this, Nancy informed us, or the squirrels would ransack the birdfeeders until there was nothing left. The garbage bag made for ease of cleanup.

"After Rodeo-Chediski, the wind carried so much debris into town, I had to wake up early and sweep off the birdfeeders. It was like winter in July. Ash piled so high the birds couldn't find their food," Nancy said.

"Your father's eyes have gotten worse. I'm glad Don can't see what the fire's done."

"Want to see the burn?" Rob asked me.

We'd passed some of the damage on the drive into town, the charred landscape a reminder of human carelessness, but there wasn't much else to do in Payson, so I said sure, and so we went.

Rob told me a story once, from before I ever met him. A family squabble, everyone arguing over Don's health. Once his father's vision had begun to deteriorate, Rob, as the eldest son, drove his family everywhere. Everyone crammed into Rob's Subaru, heading out to a restaurant for Christmas dinner: mother, father, brother, grandmother. They wouldn't stop fighting, so Rob started speeding. 90. 100. 110. Only the car shuddering fit to shatter made them shut up. He let them sit in terrified silence for a solid minute before easing up on the accelerator.

I can't get this story out of my head as we wind our way down dirt roads toward where Rodeo-Chediski swept through. Until the 2011 Wallow fire, Rodeo-Chediski held the record for most destructive in state history. It began on the Fort Apache Reservation, when Leonard Gregg, an out-of-work firefighter, turned arsonist. He knew conditions were dry. He knew a poorly drowned campfire or a lit cigarette thrown from a car window meant a steady paycheck. By the time Gregg's bad idea was contained, Arizona had lost 50,000 acres of desert. Thirty thousand people were evacuated. But 4,500 firefighters, including Gregg, were employed.

Rounding a dusty curve, we cross a black line and leave the living

forest. A charred ring encircles every dead tree. The red dirt scarred from fire looks like the pitted surface of the moon, bloodied, alien and unrecognizable. I can't look, and I can't look away, knowing that every summer arrives hotter and drier than the last. I picture conflagration tearing blind across scrubland, destroying all it touches.

*The risk factors for wildfire are many. These factors include weather, topography, and fuel. Of these, the only factor we can change is fuel. If we want to increase survivability, our greatest opportunity lies in changing the fuel available for burning. Some of the fuel characteristics we want to change include: amount (less fuel is better), continuity (fuels should be widely separated rather than packed tight), and location (fuels should be kept far away from people, homes, and property). Wildfires will be less likely to start, burn more slowly, burn cooler, and burn for a shorter length of time. The most common wildfire threat is burning embers. If conditions are right, pieces of burning material such as shrub branches, pinecones, and wood shake from a burning roof can be lofted in the air and transported more than a mile from the actual fire. (*Adapted from a Bureau of Land Management/National Park Services manual on wildfire prevention.)

A suicide is like a wildfire. I test the simile, but it collapses, an uninhabitable structure. Suicide is a wildfire. Metaphor is sturdier, metal-clad, more likely to survive when exposed to extreme conditions.

The risk factors for suicidal behavior are many. These factors often occur alongside disorders like depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and psychosis. Sometimes suicidal behavior is triggered by events such as personal loss or vio-

*lence. In order to be able to detect those at risk, it is crucial that we understand the role of long-term factors such as experiences in childhood, and immediate factors like recent life events. Suicide prevention programs promote interventions: for example, research shows that mental and substance abuse disorders are risk factors for suicide. Many programs focus on treating these disorders in addition to addressing suicide risk. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy can help people learn new ways of dealing with stressful experiences by training them to consider alternative actions when thoughts of suicide arise. Being exposed to others' suicidal behavior is another major risk factor. (*Adapted from National Institute of Mental Health information on suicide prevention.)

I can't imagine fighting fire. Smoke stinging your eyes, tongue coated in ash, air so hot it's like breathing inside a furnace. The certainty that what rages toward you means to kill you. I can't imagine being so full of burning that you'd terrorize your family. His untreated depression impersonal as a cigarette butt tossed from a car window, deadly ember coming to rest where forest meets shoulder. Rob drove down Woody Mountain Road until the sun was nearly up. That same road, had he continued on, would have taken him to Mogollon Rim's edge. Instead, he stopped at a golf course. Walked onto a sandtrap, one set of tracks in, none out. Put down plastic bags, for ease of cleanup. The gun in his hand, the barrel in his mouth, its metal cold and literal. I can't imagine what he thought, felt, as he lit the match. The sunrise bursting over the horizon all pink and gold and reddest red, a warning he ignored. I can't imagine it.

In 2006, the Brins Mesa Fire destroyed 4,000 acres in and around

Oak Creek Canyon and Sedona. The landscape was dotted with smoking holes where the deep roots of Ponderosa pines continued burning for weeks after the fire had been contained. In 2006, I worked part-time at a New Age magazine editing the words of people who believed that aliens, religious figures, and otherworldly beings spoke through them. Rob's death razed my life down to the ground, nothing left but red dirt and ash.

The 2010 Schultz Fire burned 23 square miles on Schultz Peak and San Francisco Mountain, both part of the mountain range crowning the city of Flagstaff. When the monsoons came, mudslides swept through, destroying homes, as the wounded forest could no longer protect the mountain from erosion. In 2010 I was living in Chicago, working on a PhD in creative nonfiction; my research focused on trauma theory, memoir, and memory. I'd been accepted based on a series of unpublished essays about Rob. I promised myself, and my PhD program, that I'd write a memoir about his suicide.

The Wallow Fire of 2011 burned 841 square miles of the Apache National Forest. Instead of writing a memoir, in 2011 I wrote a horror story about two children who have lost their firefighter father to an unexpected turning of the wind. The children are visited by a jackrabbit that grows in size proportionate to their grief, which they neither understand nor acknowledge. At the story's end, the rabbit is the size of a house. The children curl up inside its massive ears and hold one another. They do not cry.

In 2016, Flagstaff is plagued by an unknown arsonist. I'm married

to a fiction writer, and he believes me when I tell him it's time to finish the memoir. I've completed my PhD, but I defended a dissertation comprised of allegorical short stories—including the one about the jackrabbit—rather than the promised memoir. I find I can write about Rob only via metaphor. My husband tells me to be brave and write about the thing itself rather than concealing it in smoke and flame.

We drink Arizona-brewed beers in a highly flammable building. The Commerce bar sits on an alley that opens onto historic Route 66, the road that made Flagstaff famous. My hometown has burned to the ground not once but twice; a single structure predates 1888, the year of Flagstaff's last total loss. I've spent a decade running away from this town, its threat level always red, the place where my 23-year-old self went up in smoke. "I can't finish one lousy essay, let alone a memoir," I say.

"I know it's hard, but you have no choice. Unless you want to stay trapped, telling the same story over and over," he says, and he's right. I can write about teaching in Iowa, eating in Chicago, and hiking in the Grand Canyon; I can write about talking houses, daughterless witches, and giant jackrabbits, but always I'm still writing about Rob. My beer tastes sour. Flagstaff's arsonist is still at large.

"Look up," my husband says, pointing. On the wall hangs a painting of the exact building we're sitting in. "There's your ending."

The Commerce is in flames. Customers pour into the street, clogging the exit in their desperation to escape.

I stare at the painting until it blurs. Everything in me wants to flee this burning building. Instead, my husband and I sit and talk—about allegory, and smoking, and feeling robbed—until closing time.

NOTES

Smith, Ed, et al. "Chapter 8: Fire Mitigation Practices." *Living with Wildfire in Arizona: A Fire Ecology Guide to Arizona Ecosystems and Firewise Concepts*. Arizona Firewise, pp. 111-145.

"Suicide Prevention." *National Institute of Mental Health*. National Institutes of Health. Apr. 2015. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml.